

Vital earth/vibrant earthworks/ living earthworks vocabularies

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For thousands of years, mounds, embankments, and other earthworks were dreamed, planned, and built; occupied, used, and maintained; abandoned, reoccupied, and reused; redreamed, rebuilt, and repurposed by Indigenous peoples living and traveling along the rivers and other waterways that connect the eastern half of the North American continent into a vast network – from what is now Louisiana in the south to what is now Ontario in the north. During that long tenure, mounds, embankments, and other earthworks were also studied, contemplated, and discussed by Indigenous intellectuals, by political and spiritual leaders, by builders, users, and ordinary citizens. Not only empirical research but theoretical reflection was necessarily grounded in Indigenous languages and communities, conducted through Indigenous methodologies. For the past 200 years, however, energy devoted to understanding the complexity of these built environments and their multiple potential meanings and uses has been organised by predominantly non-Native archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians, both amateur and professional, and within predominantly non-Native languages, epistemologies, and systems of ethics. In this way, like so much of Indigenous life and culture, earthworks research has been disconnected from the foundations of Indigenous inquiry. The majority of this non-Native research has restricted its investigations to questions about the physical construction of earthworks within specific chronologies (these researchers repeatedly ask not only *who* built the mounds, but *how* they were built, *when*, and whether within briefer or longer periods of time) and to questions about the siting of earthworks within specific geographies (*where* they were built, but also *why* they were built in certain ways at certain times and in certain locations). The organisation and control of this work by non-Native researchers and institutions, moreover, has been – and continues to be – bolstered by the colonial dislocations and the often forced relocations of the descendants of the Indigenous peoples who built the mounds.

Although the scholarly fields of archaeology, anthropology, and history have begun to expand the scope of their interests and the range of their interlocutors, including an increased attention to consulting with Indigenous communities, relatively little of this research has been devoted to understanding – or imagining – the effects of earthworks on people: those who came together to plan and build individual mounds or embankments or to construct multi-structure complexes and expansive cities; those who lived among earthworks permanently or seasonally; those who visited sites, centres, and cities for trade or special events; those who embarked on sacred

pilgrimage to important burials or to potent effigies perhaps once in a lifetime. Relatively few researchers have asked what it might have meant to live, work, and play, to celebrate and mourn, in the presence of – and in relation to – earthworks. And relatively few have asked what it might have meant to gather at these sites for ceremony or debate, for astronomical observations, for sporting events and games, for the securing of marriages and other forms of social and political alliance, for artistic and intellectual exchange, for regular upkeep, maintenance, and repair. In fact, most research that engages the potential ‘experiential’ meaning of earthworks, as opposed to their potential ‘referential’ or symbolic meaning, focuses on the embodied experience of building the mounds, basket by 50-pound basket, rather than on the embodied experience of living among, visiting, or contemplating one’s relationship to these structures.¹ Even less research has considered what those experiences might mean for Indigenous peoples living in the present or in the future.

Our understanding of earthworks and both their original and ongoing significance has been limited, in other words, by the methodologies, discourses, and colonial assumptions of standard archaeological, anthropological, and historical practice. Part of that limitation has been the discursive severing of the planners, builders, and first users of the mounds, who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago, from historical and, especially, contemporary Indigenous peoples of North America.² The idea of continuous genealogies and clear links from the distant past of earthworks planning, construction, and original use to the contemporary period of Indigenous appreciation, reclamation, repatriation, and potential reactivation of earthworks has proven too problematic for dominant archaeological, anthropological, and historical communities, as well as for a host of other non-Native communities that wish to claim kinship with or assert authority over the mounds, such as Indian hobbyists, certain religious groups, and versions of the New Age movement.³ Only rarely are Indigenous individuals, communities, or nations invited to contribute to dominant conversations about North American earthworks, their histories, their ongoing significance, their possible futures.

Projects designed within frameworks of critical Indigenous studies, which typically foreground ongoing Indigenous relationships to place, can offer productive alternatives. I am not trained as an archaeologist, anthropologist, or historian, and the concern of my recently completed book manuscript, *Earthworks Rising: Mound Building in Native Art, Literature, and Performance*, is not to engage the orthodox questions driving these dominant fields of inquiry. As a scholar of contemporary Native American and Indigenous literary and artistic self-representation, and as a person of Chickasaw descent, I engage the useful work of archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians – always with a critical eye – but my objective is to move beyond typical analyses of earthworks as sources of ethnographic data about so-called prehistoric peoples cut off from living Indigenous communities and nations. Instead, in line with Indigenous studies frameworks and in collaboration with Indigenous researchers, I investigate contemporary Native American artistic, literary, and performative engagements with earthworks and earthworks principles.⁴ Based on analyses of these contemporary engagements, I speculate about how earthworks themselves might be understood as forms of Indigenous knowledge still relevant in the present and central to Indigenous futures. In developing such speculations, I begin with the idea that earthworks can be understood as a form of Indigenous ‘writing’. Following the lead of Indigenous artists and intellectuals, I employ a definition of writing expansive enough to include any form of encoding knowledge in any medium, rather than a narrow definition that would apply exclusively to alphabetic, syllabic, logographic, and other sound- or speech-based scripts.⁵ Not everyone will agree with this usage. But my hope is that even those who wish to restrict the term *writing* only to alphabetic, syllabic, and logographic scripts will join me and other researchers working from critical Indigenous studies perspectives to pose a central question: How might

earthworks be understood as systems of signs arranged into systematic patterns, as systematic encodings of knowledge produced through Indigenous technologies and practices?

My first contribution to understanding how the work of contemporary Native American artists, writers, and performers re-engages earthworks and earthworks principles was prompted by my early attempts to analyse how these contemporary productions – novels, poems, essays, performance pieces, and works of visual and installation art – make meaning at the level of their underlying *structures* as well as at the level of their explicit commentary and themes.⁶ Re-viewing earthworks through the lens of these contemporary productions, I observed that mounds do not present a form of writing knowledge *on* the land, a form of marking or *inscribing* surfaces, as some of my colleagues were beginning to suggest more than a decade ago.⁷ Rather, mounds present a form of layering carefully selected rocks and soils into scripts that rise *above* the earth's surface, adding to, reforming, and altering the landscape. Earthworks create raised scripts of platform, conical, linear, ridgetop, and, perhaps most spectacularly, geometric and effigy 'mounds'. This is encoded knowledge presented as scripts raised from 'borrowed' rock and soil, and thus a form of writing literally *through the medium* of the land itself. The observation felt like a revelation; I realise now, though, it was but the beginning of understanding. Likening earthworks to writing, even within the broadest of definitions, takes us only so far toward understanding diverse earthworks in themselves and in their relationships to builders, original users, and later users and caretakers, let alone toward understanding how Native artists, writers, performers, and communities engage earthworks and earthworks principles in contemporary productions.

Individual earthworks are but individual components within complex built environments that indicate multiple forms of planning and physical manipulation. This includes the 'borrowing' and transportation of particular rocks and soils from one location to another to facilitate the piling, heaping, and sculpting of particular mounds and embankments. But it also includes the infilling and levelling of adjacent plazas or the interiors of walled enclosures, and the construction of raised causeways through marshes, wetlands, or other low-lying areas. All of these activities took place on a monumental scale, and often within expansive networks of interrelated sites, complexes, centres, and cities.⁸ The forms of these Indigenous built environments encode knowledge, but their 'reading' requires more – or something different – than alphabetic, syllabic, logographic, or other semiotic deciphering. Earthworks and earthworks complexes are not simply visually apprehended, understood in the way we understand various kinds of models and diagrams. They are neither idealised abstractions of coordinates drawn on maps nor geometric figures plotted on graph paper. Their reading, as I demonstrate across the chapters of my manuscript, requires methodologies that are embodied and performative: walking specific sites in order to 'see' them, making physical contact with mounds and embankments, placing our human bodies in relation to bodies of earth.⁹ Moreover, earthworks and earthworks complexes are not simply inert matter – dead physical material appropriate for standard archaeological methods of stratigraphy and taxonomy. From many Indigenous perspectives, earthworks are embodied material and earthworks are animate. Assembled from vital earth, during their planning, construction, and use earthworks are imbued with social, psychic, and spiritual power that humans encounter physically, socially, and spiritually, and through which humans encounter each other as well as other-than-human beings and forces.

I have more to say about these complex issues of the embodied and animate materiality of earthworks. For this brief chapter, I focus on a dimension I call 'living earthworks vocabularies'. Before moving to that discussion, however, I should state why I do not engage the currently fashionable discourse of the so-called new materialisms, which similarly describe understandings of physical matter as 'lively' and 'agentive'. Usually contextualised as part of a broader 'ontological turn' within Continental philosophy and within Anglo-American critical theory, the new

materialisms are seen as responding to the earlier ‘linguistic turn’ of poststructuralism and to the predominant focus on human subjectivity within recent research in the social sciences. The new materialisms stress, instead, the ways in which concrete, physical matter remains a defining component of events, lives, and worlds, not only for humans but also for other-than-humans. In this way, the new materialisms intersect eco-criticism and philosophical post-humanism, the environmental humanities, and animal studies. In their 2015 guide *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*, social science researchers Eve Tuck (Unangax) and Marcia McKenzie characterise the “new materialist turn” as primarily concerned with “how matter comes to matter” across a range of inquiries and analyses (Tuck and McKenzie 2015: 15). And in their 2013 essay *Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous Ecologies and ‘New Materialism’ in Contemporary Art*, art historians Jessica Horton and Janet Berlo describe how the new materialisms “share a basic conviction that matter – whether in the forest or in the lab – has agency, can move, act, assume volition, and even enjoy degrees of intelligence often assumed to be the unique domain of human subjectivity” (Horton and Berlo 2013: 17). But, as Tuck and McKenzie acknowledge and as Horton and Berlo explain in detail – and as readers of this volume will likely already be aware – sustaining the fiction of the ‘newness’ of the new materialisms depends on the foregrounding of European- and Anglo-American-derived epistemologies and perspectives and on the continued erasure of relevant Indigenous epistemologies and perspectives. “Indigenous scholars and scholars of the indigenous”, Horton and Berlo note:

will attest to the survival of alternative intellectual traditions in which the liveliness of matter is grasped as quite ordinary, both inside, and at the fringes of, European modernity. Once we take indigenous worldviews into account, the ‘new materialisms’ are no longer new.

(Horton and Berlo 2013: 18)

A range of Indigenous and Indigenous studies scholars, working across multiple disciplines, offer related critiques and corrections. In an essay published in 2015, for instance, the noted Dakota social scientist Kim Tallbear states:

But the field [of new materialisms] has starting points that only partially contain indigenous standpoints. First of all, indigenous peoples have never forgotten that nonhumans are agential beings engaged in social relations that profoundly shape human lives. In addition, for many indigenous peoples, their nonhuman others may not be understood in even critical Western frameworks as *living*. ‘Objects’ and ‘forces’ such as stones, thunder, or stars are known within our ontologies to be sentient and knowing persons.

(Tallbear 2015: 234)¹⁰

Earthworks are among the categories construed as inanimate ‘objects’ within non-Native discourses but often function as living beings and agentive forces within Indigenous understandings.

A central Indigenous premise about the vitality of ancient earthworks is that it was not only selected rocks and soils that were carefully layered in the building of these structures. Words were spoken and chanted, songs were sung, dances were danced *into* earth during the preparation of carefully chosen sites for construction, during the preparation of soils carefully selected and then carefully gathered as materials for building. Words were spoken and chanted, songs were sung, and dances were danced *into* earth once again during mound construction, during the subsequent ceremony, during regular upkeep, maintenance, and renewal. In these ways, layers of packed rocks and soils were imbued with the power of sacred discourse, the energy of rhythmic movement. It is this communal power and energy that prepared the earth and helped build the

mounds. It is this communal power and energy that continues to sustain their extant remains, their remnants and traces.

A sense of this communal power is conveyed in the 2001 novel *Shell Shaker* by Choctaw writer and intellectual LeAnne Howe. At a critical moment in the plot, one of the contemporary Choctaw characters living in southeastern Oklahoma – where the Choctaw were removed in the 1830s – experiences a vision of the construction of the Nanih Waiya, a large earthen platform the Choctaw consider their Mother Mound. In the elder's vision, the platform is constructed in what is now northern Mississippi in a highly coordinated collaboration among ancestors of the Choctaw, their descendants, and the Earth herself, a collaboration that is simultaneously ancient and ongoing. Multiple generations from the distant past to the present “open Mother Earth's beautiful body”; in response, “Mother Earth turns herself inside out and a gigantic platform mound emerges out of the ground”. Working together, the multi-generational human community and the agentive Earth produce a “sacred ovulation”, a “gift” for the future – the Nanih Waiya (Howe 2001: 159).

But what do I mean by ‘living earthworks vocabularies’? That question also leads to southern Oklahoma, where not only the Choctaw but their close relatives the Chickasaw and other Southeastern nations were removed in the 1830s, and where the Chickasaw Cultural Centre opened outside the town of Sulphur in 2010. The Centre's 184-acre campus sits adjacent to the renowned Chickasaw National Recreation Area, south of Ada, the contemporary seat of government for the Chickasaw Nation. The Centre's beautiful grounds and extensive facilities boast state-of-the-art historical and cultural exhibits, a well-equipped research centre and archive, conference space, a high-tech theatre, an art gallery, indoor and outdoor performance spaces, a large pond and water pavilion, an honour garden marking the achievements of inductees to the Chickasaw Hall of Fame, two working vegetable gardens, two well-stocked gift shops, and a café, as well as a large staff of Chickasaw citizens who serve as knowledgeable interpreters of Chickasaw history and *living* culture.¹¹ In addition, the Nation has reconstructed a Chikasha Inchokka', a Southeastern-style village surrounded by a wood stockade. This ‘traditional’ village can be viewed aerially, from a height of three stories, standing on the Sky Bridge adjacent to the main exhibit hall. Visitors are not limited to this bird's eye view, however; they can also walk *into* the village to explore a large council house, examples of summer and winter family houses, a corn crib, gardens, a ceremonial arena with a central fire pit flanked by brush arbours, and a stickball court. The village's most impressive structure, but perhaps also its most subtle, is a full-scale replica of a Southeastern earthwork: a ceremonial platform mound newly constructed by the Nation on behalf of Chickasaw and other Southeastern peoples.¹²

The campus as a whole has been designed to enable immersive experiences. In the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Centre, a series of brief videos running at multiple viewing stations orient visitors to aspects of Chickasaw landscapes and histories (Chikasha Poya translates as “We are Chickasaw!”). Specific exhibits encourage visitors to handle material objects, practice basic Chickasaw vocabulary, listen to oral storytelling, or contemplate the veracity of different forms of historical evidence – a diary entry written by a European visiting the Southeast, for example, compared to a Chickasaw map painted on a tanned deer hide. After learning about thousands of years of changing life in the homeland, visitors are guided along a difficult, upward-slanting path representing the 1830s forced Removal to the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, then invited to participate in the renewing, counter-clockwise movement of a stomp dance they can perform in community and around the central fire through an interactive holographic display. At the Aaimpa' Café, visitors can taste pashofa (corn soup) and highly-prized grape dumplings. At the Chikasha Inchokka', they can enter and explore houses, try their hand at stickball and other

games, watch a live performance of a stomp dance around the central fire while sitting beneath the shade of brush arbours, and walk the circumference of an actual mound.

The contemporary earthwork is but one component within a broader Chickasaw assertion of political, cultural, artistic, and intellectual sovereignty. The Chickasaw Nation is actively asserting control over how its history is written and interpreted, in printed books in multiple genres published by the Chickasaw Press, in videos and digital media produced through Chickasaw TV and posted online, and in a variety of built environments – from the deep past to the present and forward into the future.¹³ To build an earthwork is literally to move and reshape earth to align with surrounding waterways, with other natural features in the landscape, with the sky-world above. But to build an earthwork is also to move and reshape earth to align with the symbolic systems that undergird, express, and shape *living* cultures. As forms of spatialised knowledge – as forms of Indigenous writing – earthworks intersect traditions of place naming and place mapping, intersect traditions of rhythmic sound and choreographed movement, intersect traditions of visual and tactile encoding, intersect traditions of drawn, painted, and incised marks on multiple surfaces. They serve as evocative mnemonics that help transfer communal memory across time.¹⁴ At the Chickasaw Cultural Centre, signage posted in the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Hall, at the Sky Bridge overlooking the Chikasha Inchokka', and at points along the periphery of the reconstructed platform mound inform Native and non-Native visitors alike – and remind Chickasaw citizens and descendants in particular – that while earthworks are part of very old Southeastern cultures, they are also part of *living* vocabularies and worldviews. They represent ways of understanding and interacting with land and place that, despite violent attack and forced removal, have not only survived but incited renewal.¹⁵

The specific earthworks vocabularies on display at the Centre are suggestive of the multiple ways Southeastern peoples have understood mounds and mound principles in the past, but also of the multiple ways they continue to develop their understandings in the present.¹⁶ Over repeated visits, I became fascinated by these vocabularies and, more precisely, by how they create a conversation – a ritual call-and-response – between the language used in the signage at the Chikasha Inchokka' Traditional Village and the language used in the signage in the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Centre. At the Chikasha Inchokka', near the platform mound, a prominent sign reads:

This mound, or *aayampo' chaaha'*, is a reconstruction of a precontact platform mound or 'temple mound'. The mounds were built by our Chickasaw ancestors working together, carrying individual baskets of dirt from nearby. Symbolic colors of clay such as red and white were sometimes used. Our Chickasaw ancestors living in the 1700s referred to the mounds as *aayampo' chaaha'*, *aayampo'* then meaning 'crocker' or 'pottery', *chaaha'* meaning 'to be tall', suggesting that our ancestors thought mounds resembled inverted pots. Today, speakers of *Chikashshanompa'* (the Chickasaw language) might call mounds *onchaba chaaha'*, meaning 'tall hill'.

The brief account, intended for a public audience, offers a surprisingly sophisticated lesson in Chickasaw historical linguistics: the vocabulary used to describe mounds has shifted over time (from the noun *aayampo'* [pottery] to the noun *onchaba* [hill]), but it has also maintained some continuity (in the consistent use of the adjective *chaaha'* [tall]). Moreover, the account's reference to ancestors living in the 1700s provides a clue about the likely sources of this knowledge, namely, the presence of French and English traders, who lived among the Chickasaw and their neighbours beginning in the early 18th century and who recorded Southeastern vocabularies in their journals and other writings. Along with subsequent non-Native works, such as word lists,

grammars, and dictionaries compiled by American missionaries, government agents, and settlers in the 19th century, these early records have become key sources for the Nation that augment the knowledge that remains within Indigenous oral, graphic, and other traditions. And finally, the older phrase used for mounds, *aayampo' chaaha'* (written here using a modern orthography), is described as based primarily in mimesis. The account articulates a specific theory of meaning-making: contemporary Chickasaw think their ancestors thought the shapes of the mounds bore a physical resemblance to the shapes of inverted pots.

Unlike the signage posted at the Chikasha Inchokka', which emphasises this older earthworks vocabulary, the signage posted in the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Centre emphasises a vocabulary that is more contemporary. This signage also shifts emphasis from the mounds and their material forms to the expansive reach of the pre-contact Chickasaw homeland and to the expansive temporality of what is today the Chickasaw Nation. Under the tripartite heading "A Great Civilization/*Moundbuilders/onchaba ikbi'*", a prominent sign reads, in two parts:

Our ancestors were *onchaba ikbi'*, the moundbuilders of the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Our territory stretched from the Midwest, to New England, and through the southeastern United States. Mounds were constructed from 500 to over 2,000 years ago in this region.

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In our tradition, the Chickasaws, as well as dozens of tribes, are the direct descendants of Mississippian civilization, which was active from about AD 900 to 1700. The powerful and far-reaching Mississippian economic and political structure greatly influenced and shaped our culture.

One notes, immediately, the ways in which this signage contradicts typical archaeological, anthropological, and historical accounts. Written from an Indigenous perspective, the signage rejects the discourse of 'mystery' about what happened to Mississippian peoples and actively asserts the status of Mississippian 'civilisation'. Instead of the orthodox discourse of 'they were on their way to civilisation but did not quite get there' and 'nobody knows what became of them', visitors learn that the supposedly *missing* Mississippians continued to change over time, to develop over generations, evolving into new peoples like the Chikasha encountered by the Spanish in the 16th century and reforming into new nations like the Chickasaw the US government forcibly removed to Oklahoma in the 1830s. The image included as background for this sign is a piece of pottery – the *aayampo'* foregrounded in the prominent sign at the Chikasha Inchokka'. This *aayampo'* features multiple layers of curvilinear decorations in the emblematic colours black, red, and white. But the pot's round body and fluted neck bear little physical resemblance to a flat-topped ceremonial mound or 'tall hill', and thus the image appears to question the outdoor sign's assertion of mimesis.

Another prominent sign inside the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Centre bears the tripartite heading "Ancestral Ties/*Connecting with our homeland/onchaba'*". Here emphasis is placed on how mounds were typically created not in isolation, but rather as part of 'towns and cities'. The account also emphasises how contemporary Chickasaw – despite their ancestors' forced removal from Southeastern sites and despite their own temporal distance from the traditions of large-scale mound building – continue to feel connected to these ancient structures. The primary parts of the sign read:

There are many *onchaba* (mounds) and mound groups in the ancestral homeland of the Chickasaws. They were associated with towns and cities. The largest was Moundville.

Others include: Shiloh Mounds, Pinson Mounds, Ingomar Mounds, Wickliffe Mounds and Emerald Mound.

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Some Chickasaws who have visited mounds sense a special feeling of kinship. For every site that remains, thousands have been destroyed.

In language that is scrupulously understated, the penultimate sentence articulates what is for many a highly personal experience. The sign is careful to present neither an unauthorised exposure of private Indigenous feelings nor a hyperbolic statement of New Age mysticism. It is the final sentence, however, despite similar restraint, that is especially poignant. Although the sentence conceals the agency of mound site destruction – this politeness is perhaps not inappropriate for an Indigenous cultural centre open to a mostly non-Native public – many readers will infer the agents implied. The background for this sign illustrates its primary themes by juxtaposing three distinct images. First, under the initial headings and set partially behind the language quoted above, there is a ghosted image of Mississippian-era pottery designs. To the right, beneath the third heading, there is a contemporary photograph of one of the prominent Southeastern sites mentioned in the account. And to its right is a large map of the eastern half of North America that marks prominent mound sites located across the Southeast and the Mississippi Valley.

The call-and-response elicited between the outdoor signage at the Chikasha Inchokka' Traditional Village, with its emphasis on *aayampo' chaaha'*, and the indoor signage in the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Centre, with its emphasis on *onchaba*, becomes more obvious when we take into account the scholarship of John Dyson, a non-Native historical linguist commissioned by the Chickasaw Nation to research and write *The Early Chickasaw Homeland*, published by the Chickasaw Press in 2014.¹⁷ Dyson's research engages not only the early French, English, and subsequent American records of Chickasaw vocabularies, but also the earliest known records produced by the Spanish, including members of the de Soto expedition in 1539–1542. Dyson (2014) places these multiple records within their comparative linguistic contexts, and his painstaking collations help him piece together a remarkably comprehensive account of Chickasaw life, social organisation, and history in the Southeastern homeland.

Although it is not his primary emphasis, Dyson's expansive investigation touches upon earthworks vocabularies. He writes, for instance:

The nineteenth-century geographer and ethnologist Henry Schoolcraft recorded that the Chickasaw tribe referred to prehistoric southeastern mounds as 'navels' (*ittalbish*), and John Swanton [another prominent anthropologist, folklorist, and linguist who worked across the end of the 19th century into the first half of the 20th century] also remarked that the Creek used the same terminology in their own language. Those mounds were obviously regarded by both the Chickasaw and the Creek as symbols of human birth.

(Dyson 2014: 28)

This aspect of mound symbolism intersects the signage adjacent to the reconstructed ceremonial mound at the Chikasha Inchokka'. Dyson continues:

The mound stood for the center of the earth in the same way that the navel represented the center of the maternal body. Yet it bears mentioning that the Chickasaw also referred to those prehistoric mounds as *ampo' chaaha'*, tall pottery vessels or clay urns which have

long been associated with Southeastern burials, including urn interments in the traditional Chickasaw homeland.

(Dyson 2014: 28)

Dyson uses an older Chickasaw orthography, rendering *aayampo' chaaha'* as the more streamlined *ampo' chaaha'*, similar to the closely related Choctaw *ampo chaha*. His research suggests that the phrasing may function differently than simple mimesis – or that it may function in one or more ways *in addition to* simple mimesis – expanding its potential to make meaning for multiple audiences. Rather than (or in addition to) recording a sense that the shapes of the mounds resemble the shapes of inverted pots, *aayampo' chaaha'* may (also) record a sense that the mounds represent – and perhaps function as – points of intersection for human birth (the mounds are symbolic navels) and human death (the mounds are symbolic clay urns used for interment) (Dyson 2014).¹⁸

Dyson's analysis provides a productive lens through which to review an earlier source of linguistic knowledge, Cyrus Byington's *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* (1915), which Choctaw and Chickasaw intellectuals continue to find useful despite its colonial provenance. The non-Native Reverend Byington, born in Massachusetts in 1793, worked as a Christian missionary among the Choctaw for nearly 50 years, beginning in 1819, almost two decades prior to their forced removal. Although Byington completed a first draft of a Choctaw grammar in 1834 and continued to revise this and related documents until his death in 1868, his dictionary was not published until 1915, when the manuscript was edited by the prominent non-Native anthropologists John Swanton, previously mentioned, and Henry Halbert.¹⁹ Reading Byington through Dyson, we can note the following possibilities. The Chickasaw *aayampo' chaaha'*, or the Choctaw *ampo chaha*, can mean 'tall clay pot', as suggested on the signage at the Chikasha Inchokka'. But the phrase can also mean something more metaphorical or symbolic – or possibly more descriptive of the agentive force of the mounds – related to the idea that mounds stand at the profound intersections of human birth and death. As Byington (1915) records in his dictionary, the noun *ampo* can mean a bowl or pan, pottery more generally, or any kind of vessel. But *ampo* can also mean the specific kind of clay pottery referred to in English as *earthenware*. In other words, *ampo* can emphasise a vessel, a hollow container, made specifically from "earth" in the form of porous clay.²⁰ The connection between the English language terms *earthenware* and *earthworks* is notable and provocative. Similarly, Byington records that the adjective *chaha* can mean high, lofty, or tall. But *chaha* can also mean steep or elevated, as well as eminent, grand, and *sublime*. In other words, *chaha* possesses not only a range of literal meanings related to height, but also a range of figurative and possibly spiritual meanings related to prominence, importance, and power. In addition to 'tall clay pot', *ampo chaha* may mean something like 'sublime earthenware vessel' – a productive conduit between worlds, an active portal between the living and the dead.²¹

But there are potentially other dimensions to the living earthworks vocabulary of *ampo chaha*. In 2003, an interdisciplinary team of non-Native researchers published a land- and water-focused analysis of the celebrated Mississippian earthworks city known as Cahokia, located near what is now St. Louis, Missouri, and the massive site's broader environment on the Mississippi floodplain. Titled *Envisioning Cahokia: A Landscape Perspective*, this innovative study was written collaboratively by two anthropologists who are also earth scientists, two geographers who are also archaeologists, and a landscape architect. Shifting emphasis away from an exclusively archaeological perspective on Cahokia, the research collective notes in their introduction:

For the most part, the archaeological community does not have the information that it needs to place the Cahokia site in context. [...] There remains a lack of volume-length, holistic considerations of the cultural dynamics at Cahokia. We maintain that a landscape approach can be used to synthesize our knowledge about the Cahokia site and to provide a robust account of how a people interacted with the environment at a critical point in human history.

(Dalan et al. 2003: 13)

Stated succinctly: “At the heart of [their] landscape approach at Cahokia lies a desire to document the relationship that the Mississippians had with the land” (Dalan et al. 2003: 15). After visiting the Chickasaw Cultural Centre and contemplating its provocative signage, what I hoped to learn from this study, more precisely, was what kind of relationship the Mississippians at Cahokia might have had with the porous clay used to make *ampo chaha*.

Envisioning Cahokia (2003) provides a high level of detail about the design, engineering, and construction of large platform mounds. And although its non-Native authors did not consult Indigenous communities, the study nonetheless provides details that intersect the living earth-works vocabularies displayed at the Chickasaw Cultural Center and, especially, the idea that *ampo chaha* may mean something like ‘sublime earthenware vessel’. In describing the monumental, multi-terraced, nearly one-hundred-feet-high platform at Cahokia known as Monks Mound, the researchers note the specific functions of porous clay as a key building material:

A significant portion of the mound mass was composed of clays with a high shrink-swell capacity and low hydraulic conductivity. When wet, these clays displaced significantly more volume than in the dry condition, whereas upon drying they contracted and tended to crack. The consequences of repeated episodes of drying and wetting are obvious: they produced great instability. Given a high local water table and an annual average of over 65,000 cubic meters of precipitation on the surface of the mound, continual water control was clearly essential for maintenance.

(Dalan et al. 2003: 138)

The builders of the massive platform had to contend with the multiple conditions and contingencies of the floodplain environment, including the types of soils and other materials readily available, a high water table, and regular seasons in which the weather shifted from one extreme to another. Such conditions and contingencies work against the stability of mounds constructed from borrowed and reformed earth. How did the Mississippians at Cahokia adjust their design and building techniques to accommodate these variables? The researchers describe the builders’ clay-based solutions in these terms:

The base or core of the mound was composed of a 6- to 7-meter-high clay platform. Water pulled up into the mound by capillary action to a height of up to 10 meters kept the smectite clays in this core perennially saturated with capillary water (in an expanded state), thus forming an excellent supporting base for the enormous weight above it. A fair amount of earth would have been needed on top of this core in order to pull up the capillary water; without it, the core would have cycled through wet and dry states throughout the year and hence been unstable. Thus, from an engineering standpoint, it made sense for the bulk of the mound to be constructed relatively rapidly.

(Dalan et al. 2003: 138)

The designers, engineers, and builders of the mound discovered how to create a tall and porous clay core that, once compressed by a large mass of soil, would pull water up from the ground and then remain saturated. In this expanded state, the clay core would maintain its stability over time; this expanded clay base would, in turn, help the larger mound maintain its stability over time as well. It was a remarkably successful solution. The researchers conclude:

The degree of success of all these efforts can be measured by the long-term stability of the mound. [...] no major failures occurred for a thousand years in spite of the instability of materials and the enormous mass and surface area of the structure. Only in the last two decades has the mound experienced major failure [because of changes in the water table due to modern industries], with the several hundred years of stability testifying to the skills of the makers.

(Dalan et al. 2003: 139)

This information allows the analysis of the living earthworks vocabularies on display at the Chickasaw Cultural Centre to be developed even further. The term *ampo chaha* can mean ‘tall clay pot’ and construct meaning mimetically, indicating a physical resemblance between the shapes of platform mounds and the shapes of (some if not all) inverted pots. The term can mean ‘sublime earthenware vessel’ and construct meaning archetypally, indicating fundamental cycles of birth leading to death leading to birth. And the term can also mean ‘smectite clay core’ and construct meaning architectonically, indicating proven techniques for harnessing the properties of porous clay in order to guarantee mound stability over time. It is possible that the living earthworks vocabulary of *aayampo’ chaaha’* encodes in its precise language and in its condensed, polysemic phrasing both a metaphysical understanding of how humans can make connections between worlds and a critical technique for physical construction that can help ensure long-term duration.

Time and again, we learn the lesson of the ancestors’ genius and practical sense, deeply rooted in knowledge of place, long before the invention of supposedly modern technologies and the designation of the supposedly ‘new’ materialisms.

To conclude, I draw attention to additional signage displayed in the Chikasha Poya Exhibit Centre. Under the four-part heading “Where We Began / *Stories of Chickasaw origins* / *shakchi* / *wihat tanowa*”, the two-part sign reads:

We have tribal stories that tell of the creation of our world. In the beginning, *shakchi* (crawfish) brought mud from below the water. This was used to form the earth from which people were created.

###

Many stories tell of how the Chickasaws became a tribe. All speak of *wihat tanowa* (migration). After traveling for generations, we settled in our homeland centered in northeastern Mississippi.

Note the assertion of evocative juxtaposition – rather than disabling contradiction – in this coupling of the seemingly divergent concepts of emergence *and* migration. Additional details of the Chickasaw version of the Earth Diver story, in which the seemingly small and insignificant Crawfish plays a starring role, are provided in other parts of the exhibit centre. Additional details are provided, as well, of the migration story in which the ancestors who become the Chickasaw, along with their close relations who become the Choctaw, are led on their extensive journey by

a sacred White Dog, a being who represents the visible stars of the Milky Way. The juxtaposition is evocative of the majestic Serpent Mound effigy located in what is now southern Ohio, with its own juxtaposition of an uncoiling horned snake representing the below world and an oval disk representing the sun in the above world, both set on the arced bluff above the life-giving waters of Brush Creek and above the geological evidence of a meteor impact some 200 million years ago.²² The site's multiple juxtapositions hold in productive tension two ideas fundamental to Chickasaw and other Southeastern identities in relation to place: their origins are simultaneously from below *and* above. The Chickasaw emerged into the Southeastern homeland from the watery below world through the productive vehicle of the earthen mound. The Chickasaw migrated into the Southeastern homeland led by the glittering above world through the guiding vehicle of bright white stars. The juxtaposition resolves in the knowledge that generations of Chickasaw were born, lived, died, and then born again into these cycles in the space between worlds below and above, that is, upon the vibrant, highly constructed surface world of the Southeastern homeland.²³

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Bernardini (2004). Independent scholar Jay Miller discusses contemporary, small-scale mound building in the context of annual Native American ceremonies in his 2015 study *Ancestral Mounds*.
- 2 Miller (2015) makes a similar point in *Ancestral Mounds*.
- 3 Wobst (2005) examines a number of these issues in his useful overview essay. See also Atalay (2006).
- 4 I have been fortunate in this project to work closely with colleagues affiliated with the Newark Earthworks Center at the Ohio State University Newark, including Marti Chaatsmith (Comanche) and Christine Ballengee Morris (Eastern Band Cherokee), and with a range of Native writers, artists, and intellectuals, including LeAnne Howe (Choctaw), Monique Mojica (Guna and Rappahannock), Allison Hedge Coke (Creek, Huron, and Cherokee ancestry), Phillip Carroll Morgan (Choctaw and Chickasaw), and Alyssa Hinton (Tuscarora and Osage ancestry).
- 5 See, for example, Brooks (2008), Haas (2007), and C. Howe (2002). For a fuller discussion of these distinctions and an argument for employing an expansive definition of writing in the Indigenous Americas, see Boone and Mignolo (1994).
- 6 See, for instance, Allen (2010), Allen (2015a), and Allen (2015b).
- 7 In September 2005, for instance, the Newark Earthworks Center at Ohio State University Newark hosted an academic symposium titled "Native Knowledge Written on the Land".
- 8 The idea that earthworks need to be understood not in isolation but within broader understandings of built environments, including the creation of borrow pits and the construction of level plazas and raised causeways, is detailed in works such as Dalan et al. (2003), discussed below, and Baires (2017).
- 9 Geographers Jay Johnson and Soren Larsen make a similar point about the centrality of "embodied and performative" research methodologies, including walking, in the introduction to their 2013 co-edited collection (Johnson and Larsen 2013: 15). Guna and Rappahannock playwright Monique Mojica (2012) describes an embodied Indigenous research methodology specifically for understanding earthworks in her 2012 essay.
- 10 And in an essay Tallbear published in 2017: "I am struck again and again, reading the new materialisms, by their lack of acknowledging indigenous people" (2017: 197).
- 11 For more information, visit www.chickasawculturalcenter.com.
- 12 This type of flat-topped earthwork is also known as a 'temple mound' or 'minko [chief's] mound'. In addition to the earthwork at the Chickasaw Cultural Center near Sulphur, an earthwork has been constructed at the new American Indian Cultural Center and Museum in Oklahoma City. LeAnne Howe and Jim Wilson write about both sites in their essay published in 2015; the Oklahoma City site is also discussed in Malnar and Vodvarka (2013).
- 13 The Chickasaw Press was founded in 2006; visit www.chickasawpress.com. Find Chickasaw TV at www.chickasaw.tv.
- 14 Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks makes similar claims about other forms of Indigenous writing, such as strings and belts of wampum and birch bark scrolls (2008: 12, 220).

- 15 I am indebted to Amanda Cobb-Greetham, former Administrator for the Chickasaw Nation's Division of History and Culture and currently Professor and Chair of American Indian Studies at the University of Oklahoma, for giving me a behind-the-scenes tour of the Chickasaw Cultural Center and for engaging in extended conversation about the Center's conception, ongoing activities, and plans for the future in 2013. All interpretations of the Center and its earthwork presented in this chapter, however, are my own.
- 16 The earthworks vocabularies discussed below represent only a partial list of extant Chickasaw words for mounds. The term *shintok*, for instance, is not used in the signage at the Chickasaw Cultural Center but is commonly used in contemporary Chickasaw discourse. See, for example, the use of *shintok* in Travis (2018).
- 17 I was directed to Dyson's (2014) work by Chickasaw and Choctaw writer and intellectual Phillip Carroll Morgan, who worked alongside Dyson at the Chickasaw Press and who has found Dyson's work essential to his own research and writing. Morgan (2014) is the author of the historical novel *Anompolichi: The Wordmaster*, set in the year 1399, during a period of active mound building in the Southeast, and is currently working on a sequel.
- 18 In support of this possibility, Dyson enlists the work of another researcher of Southeastern traditions, adding, "Indeed, in his previously cited essay on mound symbolism, Vernon J. Knight Jr. has commented on those earthen 'navels' as loci of both birth and death, of emergence as well as burial" (Dyson 2014: 28).
- 19 *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* (Byington 1915) appeared as Bulletin 46 in the series produced by the Bureau of American Ethnology. Although produced by a non-Native missionary and edited by non-Native scholars, it is considered a vital source by contemporary Choctaw writers, intellectuals, and community members. I was first directed to it by the Choctaw writer and intellectual LeAnne Howe.
- 20 In English, pottery is typically divided into the three categories *earthenware* (fired at low temperatures and more porous), *stoneware* (fired at high temperatures and less porous), and *porcelain* (fired at even higher temperatures, nonporous and glasslike, and especially strong).
- 21 I am grateful to Phillip Carroll Morgan for helping me arrive at the possible translation of *ampo chaha* as "sublime earthenware vessel".
- 22 See Allen (2015b).
- 23 LeAnne Howe records a version of this understanding in her 2001 novel *Shell Shaker* through the Choctaw phrasing *Hatake okla hut okchaya bilia hoh illi bilia*, which translates into English as "The people are ever living, ever dying, ever alive", or more simply, "life everlasting." See, for example, pages 5–6.

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